

## **Round Table: Dialogue among Civilizations United Nations, New York, 5 September 2000 Provisional verbatim transcription**

**Address** by H.E. Mr Mohammed Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

**President Khatami** (*interpreted from Farsi*): The General Assembly of the United Nations has only recently endorsed the proposal of the Islamic Republic of Iran for dialogue among civilizations and cultures. Still this proposal is daily attracting increasing support from numerous academic institutions and political organizations. In order to comprehend the grounds for this encouraging reception it is imperative to take into account the prevailing situation in our world and to ponder the reasons for widespread discontent with it. It is, of course, only natural for justice-seeking and altruistic human beings to feel discontented with the status quo. The political aspects of dialogue among civilizations have already been touched upon in various settings. Today in this esteemed gathering allow me instead to begin with certain historical, theoretical, and, for the most part, non-political grounds for the call to a dialogue among civilizations.

One reason, which I can only briefly touch upon today, is the exceptional geographical location of Iran, a situation connecting various cultural and civilizational domains of Asia to Europe. This remarkable situation has placed Iran on a route of political hurricanes as well as pleasant breezes, of cultural exchange and also venues for international trade.

One of the unintended if only natural consequences of this strategic geographical location has been the fostering of a certain cultural sense which has formed a primary attribute of the Persian soul in the course of its historical evolution. Should we try to view this primary attribute from the vantage point of social psychology and then attempt to scrutinize the constituent elements of the Persian or Iranian spirit, we would recognize a remarkable and exceptional capacity, a capacity that we could refer to as its capacity to integrate. This capacity to integrate involves reflective contemplation of the methods and achievements of various cultures and civilizations in order to augment and enrich one's cultural repertoire. The spiritual wisdom of Sohrevardi, which elegantly synthesizes and integrates ancient Persian wisdom, Greek rationalism and Islamic intuitive knowledge, presents us with a brilliantly exceptional example of the Persian capacity to integrate.

We should also note that Persian thought and culture owes an immense debt to Islam as one of its primary springs of efflorescence. Islam embodies a universal wisdom. Each and every human individual, living in each and every corner of time and place, is potentially included in the purview of Islam. The Islamic emphasis on essential human equality and its disdain for such elements as birth and blood, conquered the hearts of those yearning for justice and freedom. The prominent position, on the other hand, accorded to rational thought in Islam, and the rejection of an allegedly strict separation between human thought and divine revelation, also helped Islam to overcome dualism in both latent and manifest forms.

Islamic civilization is indeed one of only a few world civilizations to have become consolidated and to have taken shape around a sacred text, in this case the noble Koran. The essential unity of the Islamic civilization stems from the unique call that reached all Islamic peoples and nations. Its plurality derives from the diversity of responses evoked after Islam reached various nations.

What we ought to consider in earnest today is the emergence of a global culture. Global culture cannot and ought not to overlook characteristics and requirements of native local cultures with the aim of imposing itself upon them. Cultures and civilizations that have naturally evolved among various nations in the course of history are constituted from elements that have gradually adapted to collective souls and to historical and traditional characteristics. As such, these elements cohere with each other and consolidate within an appropriate network of relationships. In spite of all constitutive plurality and diversity, a unique and harmonious form can be abstracted from the collection.

In order to provide natural unity and harmony in form and content for global culture and to prevent anarchy and chaos, all concerned parties should engage in a dialogue in which they can exchange

knowledge, experience and understanding in diverse areas of culture and civilization. Today it is impossible to bar ideas from freely travelling between cultures and civilizations in disparate parts of the world. However, in the absence of dialogue among thinkers, scholars, intellectuals and artists from various cultures and civilizations, the danger of cultural homelessness seems imminent. Such a state of cultural homelessness would deprive people of solace both in their own culture and in the vast open horizon of global culture.

The notion and proposal of dialogue among civilizations undoubtedly raises numerous theoretical questions. I do not mean to belittle such intellectual and academic undertakings. Rather, I want to stress that in formulating this proposal the Government of Iran has attempted to present an alternative paradigm for international relationships. This should become clearer when we take comparative notice of already existing and prevailing paradigms that underlie international relations today. It is incumbent upon us to radically examine the prevalent master paradigm and to expound the grounds for replacing it with a new one.

In order to call on the governments and peoples of the world to follow the new paradigm of dialogue among cultures and civilizations, we ought to learn from the world's past experience, especially from the tremendous human catastrophes that took place in the twentieth century. We ought to critically examine the prevalent master paradigm in international relations based on the discourse of power and the glorification of might.

From an ethical perspective, the paradigm of dialogue among civilizations requires that we give up the will for power and instead appeal to the will for empathy and compassion. Without the will for empathy, compassion and understanding there would be no hope for the prevalence of order in our world.

There are two ways to realize dialogue among civilizations. First, actual instances of the interaction and interpenetration of cultures and civilizations with each other, resulting from a variety of factors, present one mode in which this dialogue takes place. This mode of interaction is clearly involuntary and optional and occurs in an unpremeditated fashion, driven primarily by vagaries of social events, geographical situation and historical contingency.

Second, alternatively, dialogue among civilizations could also mean a deliberate dialogue among representative members of various civilizations such as scholars, artists and philosophers from disparate civilizational domains. In this latter sense, dialogue entails a deliberate act based upon premeditated indulgence and does not rise and fall at the mercy of historical and geographical contingency.

Even though human beings inevitably inhabit a certain historical horizon, we could still aim at meta-historical discourse. Indeed, a meta-historical discussion of eternal human questions ? such as the ultimate meaning of life and death or goodness and evil ? ought to substantiate and enlighten any dialogue on political and social issues. Without a discussion of fundamentals, and by simply confining attention to superficial issues, dialogue would not get us far from where we currently stand. When superficial issues masquerade as real, urgent and essential, and where no agreement, or at least mutual understanding, obtains among parties to dialogue concerning what is truly fundamental, in all likelihood misunderstanding and confusion will proliferate instead of any sense of empathy and compassion.

The movement of ideas and cultural interaction and interpenetration recur in human history as naturally and persistently as the emigration of birds in nature. Translation and interpretation have always proved to be one of the prime venues for the movement of ideas. The subtlety lies in cases where the language under translation or interpretation sounds the same as the one we use today, whereas the world, or universe of discourse to which the two languages belong, has changed over time. Particular difficulty arises when one of the parties to the dialogue attempts to communicate with another by employing a basically secularist language in an essentially sacred and spiritual discourse. By secularism here I mean the general rejection of any intuitive spiritual experience and any faith in the unseen. The true essence of humanity is more inclusive than language, and this more encompassing nature of the existential essence of humanity makes it meaningful to hope for fruitful dialogue.

It now appears that the Cartesian-Faustian narrative of Western civilization should give way and begin to listen to other narratives proposed by other human cultural domains. Today the unstoppable destruction of nature stemming from the ill-founded preconceptions of recent centuries threatens human livelihood. Should there be no other philosophical, social, political and human grounds necessitating dialogue but this pitiable relationship between humans and nature, then all selflessly peace-seeking intellectuals should endeavour to promote dialogue as urgently as they can.

Another goal of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is to recognize and to understand not only the cultures and civilizations of others, but also one's own. One ought to take a step away from oneself in order to get an enhanced perspective on oneself. Seeing in essence requires taking distance in perspective, and distance provides the grounds for immersion into another existential dimension.

In dialogue among cultures and civilizations, great artists should undoubtedly get due recognition together with philosophers, scholars and theologians. For artists do not see the sea, mountain and forest as mere mines and sources of energy, oil and fuel. For the artist the sea embodies the waving music of a heavenly dance, the mountain is not just a mass of dirt and boulders, and the forest is not merely an inanimate collection of timber to cut and use. A world so thoroughly controlled by political, military and economic conditions today inevitably begets the ultimate devastation of the environment and the eradication of all spiritual, artistic and intuitive havens. To alleviate this crisis we need the magical touch and spell of the enchanted artist and the inspired poet to rescue life ? at least part of it ? from the iron clasp of death and to make possible the continuation of life. Poets and artists engage in dialogue within and through the sacred language of spirit and morality. That language has remained safe from the poisonous winds of time.

So far as the present relationship between man and nature is concerned, we live in tragic times. The sense of solitude and monologue and the anxiety rooted within this situation embody this tragic world. Our call to dialogue aims at soothing this sense of tragedy. In addition to poetic and artistic experience, mysticism also provides us with a graceful, profound and universal language for dialogue. Mystical experience, constituted of the revelation and countenance of the sacred in the heart and soul of the mystic, opens new existential pathways on to the human spirit. A study of mystical achievements of various nations reveals to us the deepest layers of their life experience in the most universal sense. The unified mystical meaning and content across cultures and the linguistic parallelism among mystics, despite vast cultural, historical and geographical distances, is indeed perplexing. The proposal for a dialogue among civilizations builds upon the study of cultural geography of various fields of civilization. Yet the unique and irreplaceable role of governments should never be overlooked in this process.

In the absence of governmental commitment to their affirmative vote to the resolution on dialogue among civilizations, we cannot maintain high hopes for the political consequences of this proposal. Member States of the United Nations should endeavour to remove barriers from the way of dialogue among cultures and civilizations and should abide by the basic precondition of dialogue. This fundamental principle rejects any imposition and builds upon the premise that all parties to dialogue stand on essentially equal footing.

The symbolic representation of Themis, goddess of divine law and justice, has already gained virtually global acceptance as its statue appears on judiciary courts in many nations. It is now time to ask Themis to remove her blindfold. Let us ask her to set aside the lofty scale that currently weighs political and economic might as the sole measure. Instead, she should call all parties to an open discussion in various domains of thought, culture and civilization. She ought to look observantly at the evidence with open eyes and, by freeing herself from any prior obligations, she should then finally charge citizens of the world with the task of making political, economic and cultural decisions.

The escalating development of information technologies will continue to penetrate deeper layers of our lives far beyond the realm of social relationships and will form common underlying interconnections between disparate cultural and geographical regions. The science of semiotics provides us with tools to excavate such common underlying links and would form the common language we need for any dialogue. We should listen in earnest to what other cultures offer, lest by relying on profound human experiences we can seek new ways for human life.

Dialogue is not easy. It is even more difficult to prepare and open up vistas upon one's inner existence to others. A belief in dialogue paves the way for vivacious hope: the hope of living in a world permeated by virtue, humility and love, and not merely by the reign of economic indices and destructive weapons. Should the spirit of dialogue prevail, humanity, culture and civilization should prevail. We should all have faith in this triumph and we should all hope that all citizens of the world will be prepared to listen to the divine call:

"So Announce the Good News to My Servants ? Those who listen to the Word, And follow The best (meaning) in it." (*The Holy Koran, XXXIX:17-18*)

Let us hope that enmity and oppression will end and that the clamour of love for truth, justice and human dignity will prevail. Let us hope that all human beings will sing along with Hafez of Shiraz, that divinely inspired spirit, that:

"No ineffable clamour reverberates in the grand heavenly dome more sweetly than the sound of love."

I take this opportunity as the representative of one of the most ancient human civilizations to present to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as a token of friendship, one of the most ancient artifacts found in the world.

**Mr. Matsuura:** The Secretary-General has to leave us now but I should like to thank him for having joined us and for his welcome.

I now have the pleasure of asking His Excellency, Mr. [Sam Nujoma](#), President of the Republic of Namibia, to take the floor.